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Moral Rationalism and Demandingness in Kant

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Abstract

We discuss Kant's conception of moral rationalism from the viewpoint of recent debates, which have distinguished different forms of moral rationalism. We argue that Kant's version, 'silencing', is different and stronger than currently held versions of moral rationalism and that it also differs from versions of silencing that contemporary thinkers advocate. We then discuss Kant's version of silencing in the context of the moral demandingness debate and argue that silencing can make a perfect duty very demanding. However, it is important that whilst in cases of conflict between duty and personal happiness the normative standing of the latter is silenced, silencing does not require that agents do all they can in the case of imperfect duties. We finally indicate the kind of latitude imperfect duties allow for, according to Kant's strong form of Moral Rationalism.

Keywords: demandingness, overdemandingness, overridingness, moral rationalism, silencing, latitude

Moral rationalism (MR) is the view that it is always rational to do what morality demands. MR is important for assessing the demandingness of a moral theory if the theory in question assumes that conflicts between morality and an agent's well-being can occur. Recently, a number of philosophers have stressed that it is MR, especially overridingness as one of its variants, which is responsible for moral demands becoming excessive. After all, no matter what morality commands, it could never become too demanding if agents were rationally permitted to choose their own self-interest over moral commands (see Hurley 2006, Dorsey 2012).

It is certainly not a question *whether* Kant is a moral rationalist. Yet recent debate has revealed that there are profoundly different types of MR. It is therefore essential to ask what version of MR Kant holds. This is important, firstly, for understanding Kant's position in terms of the current debate. Secondly, it helps us understand how much Kant's ethics demands of agents and, more specifically, it reveals that Kant's conception of imperfect duties to others is less demanding than some Kantians, such as Jens Timmermann, have recently argued. Thirdly, our discussion is of exegetical interest, since Kant himself says different and seemingly conflicting things about the priority of morality. He sometimes speaks of how morality 'outweighs' inclinations (G 4: 400.25-31)¹, and sometimes he makes the much stronger claim that happiness is reduced 'below zero' and to 'less than nothing' by morality (G 4: 396.8-31). He also claims that 'nothing has any worth other than that which the law determines for it' (G 4: 436.1-2). This does not so much sound like the idea that morality enjoys rational priority, but rather as if morality is the *only* thing of relevance for human existence.

In this paper, we argue that Kant's form of MR, namely, silencing, differs from currently held versions of MR and from other versions of silencing that contemporary thinkers advocate. Silencing in Kant is an exceptionally strong form of MR. In the first section, we introduce MR in its different versions. In the second section, we discuss Kant's various statements concerning the authority of morality and discuss his concept of silencing. In the third section, we discuss silencing in the context of the moral demandingness debate and argue that silencing can make a perfect duty very demanding, but that it does not require agents to do all they can in the case of imperfect duties, and we explain why this is the case. We close by giving some indications of how this impacts beneficence towards the globally poor.

Before we begin, four caveats are in order:

Firstly, we think that one should distinguish between demandingness, on the one hand, and overdemandingness *objections*, i.e., objections based on the assumption that moral theories should not be demanding *beyond a certain level*, on the other hand. It would take an additional and substantial argument beyond the scope of this paper to show that perfect duties are overdemanding.²

Secondly, we will assume that *demandingness* arises from a conflict between a moral demand and an agent's well-being. This is the standard view of demandingness (see van Ackeren 2018). We will not spell out well-being any further, since it is clear enough that for Kant well-being is happiness and closely tied to the satisfaction of inclinations and desires. We will also side-step the debate about whether the well-being of agents *and* patients should be taken into account to determine the demandingness of an ethical theory, or only the well-being of agents to whom moral demands are addressed.³

Thirdly, we assume that the demands we discuss are otherwise *plausible*. We thus exclude supposed moral demands that can be discarded for reasons independent of how they impact an agent's well-being. Such an independent reason could, for instance, be that the demand is a false negative, a duty that (seemingly) follows from a moral principle but violates our intuitive notion of what our concrete duties are to the extent that we think the moral principle should be revised.⁴ In this case, the main problem is not that a demand excessively infringes on an agent's happiness but rather that it should not be required in the first place.

Fourthly, our focus on the connection of MR and demandingness does not imply that we think that MR is the *only* source of demandingness in Kant, or that it could, on its own, make Kant's ethics demanding. Scheffler plausibly argued that the overall demandingness of a normative theory is also influenced by other factors, e.g. the content of the demands and the scope of morality (Scheffler 1992: ch.1). In the current paper, we will focus solely on the role

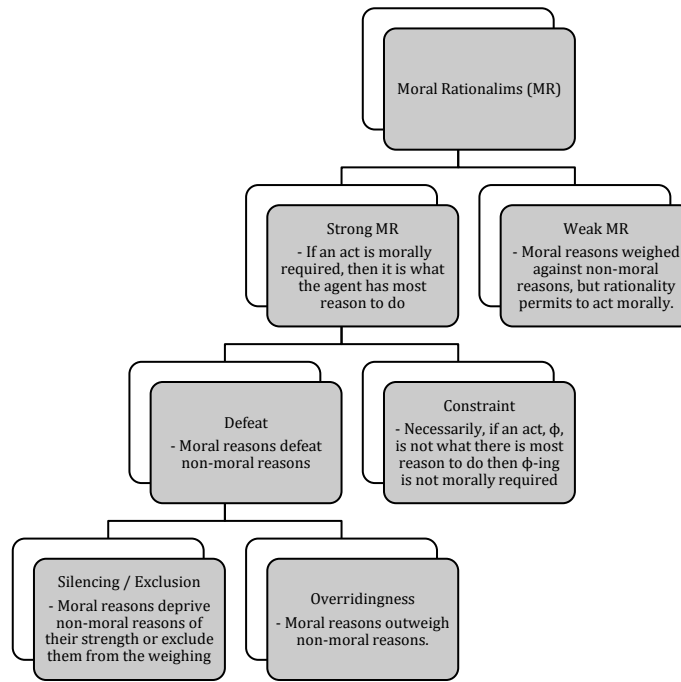
of silencing, i.e. Kant's version of MR, and show how it affects the demandingness of his theory.

1. Moral Rationalisms

There is no doubt that Kant believes that it is always rational to do what duty commands. However, the question of what kind of MR he exactly endorses has received insufficient attention, even though many of his descriptions of the absolute authority of duty are metaphorical and ambiguous. In what follows, we will begin to situate Kant's position via a dihairetic division of theories of MR.

Let us begin with a terminological as well as methodological remark. We will phrase important parts of our discussion in reasons-terminology, which is certainly apt to capture the current debate.⁵ 'Practical Reason' in the sense of a consideration that counts in favour of (or against) an action is, however, not a term Kant himself uses. He does, however, speak of a 'ground of obligation' (MM 6: 224.18–22) and 'the crush of arguments and counterarguments' (TP 8: 286.12–287.17) for and against specific options, of the 'claims' of inclinations (G 4: 405.11–12) and of the 'pathological' self (CPrR 5: 74.11–15). Furthermore, Kant speaks of a voice of reason, which 'makes even the boldest evildoer tremble' (CPrR 5: 80.1–2; see also CPrR 5: 35.13–14, RPT 8: 402.13, 402.22, 405.7–35). This voice is a consideration that speaks in favour of morality and, indeed, silences all other considerations. Kant uses expressions that come very close to the idea of a consideration that favours a course of action. It is thus, in principle, appropriate to use the term 'reason' when discussing his position in the context of a contemporary debate.

Here is a graphic of the main variants of MR and their relations to each other.



MR in its most general form is the view that it is always rational to do what morality demands. This view is often seen as ‘part of our pre-theoretical conception of, or at least aspirations for, morality’ (Stroud 1998: 176) or even as a ‘logical property of moral language’ (Hare 1981: 24). We can distinguish between a strong and a weak version of this view. Strong MR claims that if an act is morally required, then it is what the agent has most reason to do. Strong MR presupposes commensurability, i.e. that we can balance the relative strength, magnitude or weight of moral and (conflicting) non-moral reasons. Weak MR is based on the denial of commensurability (see e.g. Copp 1997). According to this view, we cannot decide which reasons are the strongest, since there is no overarching perspective from which we could decide this. However, morality is still authoritative in the weak sense of giving *permissions* to act morally albeit not requiring it (see Wittwer 2010: 31-3). We do not have to discuss weak MR here⁶, since it is clear for Kant (as we will see below) that there is an overarching perspective.

MR in its most widely held version, namely as strong MR, is the view that if an act is morally required, this is what the agent has most reason to do, from an all-things-considered

normative perspective. Until very recently, most scholars (see e.g. Darwall 2006; more references in Archer 2014) have assumed that strong MR comes only in one version, according to which strong MR is true because moral reasons always *defeat* non-moral reasons. Recently, Portmore (2011: 42-51) and Archer (2014) have developed an alternative version of strong MR. They claim that strong MR can also be explained by *constraint*: ‘if an act, Φ , is not what there is most reason to do then Φ -ing is not morally required’ (Archer 2014: 106). The constraint version of strong MR (hereafter, strong MR by constraint) does not make use of the concept of defeat. This position rather considers it a necessary condition for a moral requirement that the required act is what an agent has most reason to do, all things considered. This is not the place to discuss strong MR by constraint. Insofar as it is an alternative to the defeat version, Kant does not endorse it, since he has plenty to say about how the defeat of non-moral reasons takes place.

Concerning strong MR by defeat, it is important to note that many authors have identified it with *overridingness*. In what follows, it will become clear that this is misleading.

Overridingness is the view that, from an all-things-considered normative perspective, moral reasons, when weighed against non-moral reasons, always trump or outweigh non-moral reasons. Even the weakest moral reason exceeds the strongest non-moral reason in normative or rational strength.⁷ However, besides overridingness, there is another way in which a moral reason can defeat non-moral reasons. A moral reason can silence (undermine, undercut, bracket or exclude⁸) another reason. Defeat via silencing differs from overridingness because in the case of silencing a moral reason is not (always) stronger and does not always outweigh non-moral reasons. According to silencing, a moral reason deprives non-moral reasons of their normative strength, and non-moral reasons are thus no longer reasons that have to be taken into account in rational deliberation.⁹

2. Silencing

In this section, we explain Kant's considered conception of MR and contrast it with two other forms of MR in order to clarify his conception. Kant's many different metaphors and descriptions that capture the idea that morality enjoys rational superiority can be organized in terms of the following three categories:

1. Kant's considered view

Kant's most consistently employed metaphors that best fit with his overall theory are those of exclusion and silencing¹⁰: The moral law 'excludes all inclinations from immediate influence on the will' (CPrR 5: 80.24-5) and 'excludes altogether the influence of self-love on the supreme practical principle' (CPrR 5: 74.19-21, see also CPrR 5: 74.1-5). Exclusion, as well as Kant's claim that the moral law 'separates off entirely the influence of inclination from action' (G 4: 400.25-31), have in common that, under certain circumstances, considerations other than duty are not merely outweighed in rational deliberation, but they are barred from entering rational deliberation.¹¹ Kant himself employs a striking term for this when he praises duty for presenting us with a law 'before which all inclinations are *silenced* [*vor dem alle Neigungen verstummen*], even though they secretly work against it' (CPrR 5: 86.28-9, our emphasis)¹², and 'in the face of [which] all my inclinations must be silent [*verstummen müssen*]' (MM 6: 481.31-36).

To understand silencing as Kant intends it, it is important to distinguish between a psychological and a normative conception of silencing. Kant's conception of silencing is normative. It describes how it is rational to exclude certain considerations from some deliberations, albeit these considerations might still influence imperfectly rational agents. Silencing is supposed to capture the authority of morality in cases of conflict between inclinations that have and retain a psychologically powerful effect on the agent and moral commands that constitute the only rational option in these conflicts. In contrast to Kant's normative conception, silencing can also be understood as a psychological conception,

according to which an agent does not take account of her competing inclinations when they conflict with what she knows she morally ought to do. In this case, the agent does not experience a conflict. This distinction between the normative and the psychological conception of silencing will allow us to show in what sense Kant's version of silencing differs from McDowell's (see below).

Before we further elucidate Kant's considered position, it should be noted that there are two other clusters of passages, which on a first glance suggest a different conception than exclusion or silencing.

2. Hyperbolic passages expressing a stronger view

(a) Kant claims that the value of anything other than morality reduces 'below zero' (G 4: 396.8) if it clashes with duty and that the attainment of happiness 'reduces to less than nothing' (G 4: 396.31). It is unclear how, in Kant's framework, duty could render other goods bad as opposed to merely valueless. After all, if a consideration is to be excluded from rational deliberation or its normative standing silenced, it becomes temporarily irrelevant but not bad. That duty can reduce other goods to *below* zero is best seen as a hyperbolic statement of Kant's considered view that when competing with duty inclinations count 'for nothing' (Rel 6: 49.13). Furthermore, what Kant might be getting at here is the fact that it is bad (below zero good) that some agents have more happiness than they deserve. Alternatively, he might want to emphasize that choosing something that is 'below zero' is not merely a choice for something that is valueless in this situation but also a (rationally and morally) *wrong or bad* choice.

(b) Kant claims that 'nothing has any worth other than that which the law determines for it' (G 4: 436.1-2). This could be understood as the claim that morality is the *only* source of value and that anything other than morality must derive its goodness from morality.¹³ However, Kant also maintains that the good will, though it is the 'highest good and the condition of

every other', is not 'the sole and complete good' (G 4: 396.24-5, see also TP 8: 283.8-9). In lecture notes from the mid 1780s, Kant explicitly states that morality and happiness have different 'sources' of goodness (L-Eth Mr2 29: 600.36). Furthermore, he stresses that, whilst it is also an indirect duty to maintain one's own happiness to a certain extent (CPrR 5: 93.11-21), agents have reasons independent of morality to pursue their personal happiness, and that this pursuit can be rational if properly constrained by duty.¹⁴ Happiness can be non-derivatively and non-instrumentally good. When Kant says that the moral law 'determines' the worth of everything else, this should not be understood as if he claimed that all other worth or goodness is derivative and a form of moral worth. Rather, he maintains that other values are genuine goods but only *conditionally* good and that they can be silenced by the moral law.

3. *Outweighing*

In *Groundwork* I, Kant describes the priority of morality thus: respect for the moral law 'outweighs' inclinations (G 4: 400.25), and he also speaks of 'far outweighing' and 'surpassing' (G 4: 403.28-33). In the *Noble Tone*, Kant claims that the majesty of the law 'outweighs without thought' (*unbedenklich überwiegen*) (RPT 8: 402.26) all inclinations.

These passages seem to indicate that Kant advocates overridingness, i.e. the view that moral reasons are always stronger than non-moral reasons, instead of that the latter are excluded or silenced by moral reasons. There are two explanations for Kant's use of 'outweighing' here:

(i) As the quote from the *Noble Tone* suggests, duty outweighs *without a thought*. This indicates that the agent does not have to do any weighing, because all other considerations are excluded or silenced. Supposed outweighing here is a result of the more fundamental process of silencing.¹⁵

(ii) In the above-mentioned *Groundwork* passage (G 4: 400.25-31), Kant claims that the moral law 'outweighs [inclinations], or at least excludes [inclinations] entirely' from an agent's

choice, and ‘separates off entirely the influence of inclination from action’ (G 4: 400.25-31). Here, Kant does not indicate that outweighing is any weaker than entirely excluding. It seems that inclinations are deprived of their rational weight by the moral law and thus, trivially, outweighed in rational deliberation. If this is right, Kant does not use ‘outweighing’ here (just as in RPT 8: 4002) as a technical term in the sense of overridingness as we have introduced it. This somewhat loose use of terminology should not surprise us, as we can also still find it in contemporary debates when, for instance, Archer (2014) uses ‘overridingness’ to mean both trumping in strength and silencing, and Stroud (1998) equates overridingness with MR.

In addition, Kant might be ignoring the differences between excluding/entirely separating off and outweighing here because in *Groundwork* I he describes the common cognition of morality or how common agents experience the immediate force of respect for the moral law (see G 4: 403.18-28). The common agent is already aware that morality enjoys rational priority, but she lacks the conceptual means to correctly describe and explain this priority. Kant believes that every human being can find within their own reason the rational priority of morality over anything else (RPT 8: 402.21), but agents without philosophical training tend to think of this priority as a form of outweighing or that moral incentives are simply stronger or more powerful than other incentives.

We can now proceed on the assumption that Kant’s version of MR is a version of silencing/exclusion. To get a better understanding of Kant’s view, let us compare it with two current models, namely, those of Raz and McDowell. Joseph Raz introduces the category of so-called ‘exclusionary reason’; reasons which ‘exclude acting for another consideration which is a valid reason for acting’ (Raz 1999: 183). An otherwise valid reason is excluded from being considered in rational deliberation. Thus, there is no balancing of the normative weight of the excluded reason. This relation between reasons is what we find in Kant: in cases of conflict between duty and one’s pursuit of happiness, duty becomes an exclusionary reason

with regard to all other considerations that otherwise constitute valid reasons for actions, and that might still retain their psychological force but lose all normative support.

The main difference between Raz and Kant lies in their respective conceptions of the class of reasons that can exclude other reasons. For Raz, exclusion can potentially obtain between all kinds of reasons. Exclusionary reasons are not necessarily *moral* reasons, and the relation of exclusion is not necessarily a relation between moral and conflicting reasons concerned with the agent's well-being.¹⁶ For Kant, exclusion/silencing is the prerogative of duty alone, since it is grounded in a conditioning relation. Morality is the only unconditional good, and all other goods are conditioned in their goodness on morality. Violating morality for the sake of happiness is contrary to reason, since it undermines the worth of what it purports to achieve. This becomes most apparent in Kant's doctrine of the highest good:

[V]irtue as the condition is always the supreme good, since it has no further condition above it, whereas happiness is something that, though always pleasant to the possessor of it, is not of itself absolutely and in all respects good but always presupposes morally lawful conduct as its condition. (CPrR 5: 111.1-5)¹⁷

Comparing Kant to John McDowell, who introduced the term 'silencing' as a technical term into contemporary debates, is even more instructive. This comparison is of special interest, since Dancy (1993: 47-53) argues that McDowell's position is more extreme and problematic than Kant's. According to Dancy, McDowell holds that all moral reasons silence (Dancy 1993: 49fn.11). By contrast, 'Kant allows that moral reasons can be opposed by other reasons which may or may not win the day' (Dancy 1993: 49).

However, a closer comparison between Kant and McDowell reveals that it is rather the other way around. John McDowell believes that:

the dictates of virtue, if properly appreciated, are not weighed with other reasons at all, not even on a scale which always tips on their side. If a situation in which virtue imposes a requirement is genuinely conceived as such, according to this view, then considerations which, in the absence of the requirement, would have constituted reasons for acting otherwise are silenced altogether – not overridden – by the requirement.

(McDowell 1978: 26)

There are two important differences between McDowell and Kant. The first concerns the *scope* of silencing. For McDowell, the dictates of virtue must be ‘properly appreciated’ to be able to silence. It is only for the virtuous agent that dictates of virtue silence. Furthermore, these dictates do not coincide with all morally relevant considerations or reasons:

A caveat: notice that the position is not that clear perception of any moral reason, however weak, silences any reasons of other sorts, however strong. The reasons which silence are those which mark out actions as required by virtue. There can be less exigent moral reasons, and as far as this position goes, they may be overridden. (McDowell 1978: 29)

It is only a sub-class of moral reasons that silences other reasons, namely, those connected to requirements of virtue. Other moral reasons can be overridden. McDowell thinks that silencing is not a prerogative of the entire class of moral reasons, because not all moral reasons silence non-moral reasons, and non-moral reasons can defeat moral reasons. Modern philosophers such as Raz, McDowell and also Dancy (1993: 51-52) argue that *some* (moral or other) reasons can exclude or silence other reasons, but this is not a commitment to MR.¹⁸ According to McDowell, silencing only holds for some agents (the virtuous ones) and for some moral reasons (dictates of virtue). It is not a theory about the authority of morality in general as Kant intends his conception of silencing to be. In other words, McDowell and other

modern scholars advocate partial silencing whereas only Kant advocates universal silencing as a form of MR.

The second difference between Kant and McDowell is that for McDowell silencing captures a state of *harmony* between morality and other concerns, such as self-interest. According to McDowell, for those who are truly virtuous anything that conflicts with dictates of virtue loses its attraction. Above we introduced the distinction between a psychological and a normative conception of silencing. This distinction now allows us to explain the second difference. To McDowell, silencing does not only settle which reason is, normatively speaking, the decisive one, it also solves the psychological conflict or rather it implies that the virtuous person does not experience any conflict between dictates of virtue and self-interest.

Kant's notion of silencing, by contrast, is supposed to capture the absolute supremacy of morality in cases of *conflict*: in the case of a clash between duty and inclinations, objects of inclinations do not lose their attraction for finite rational agents (otherwise, there would not be a clash, since the agent would not be drawn to these objects any more). The point of exclusion and silencing is that an agent's inclinations remain unchanged in cases of conflict, but whatever non-moral reasons there were to act on one's inclinations before the conflict, these are not to be weighed against duty since they do not count as reasons anymore when they would conflict with duty. Kant firmly believes that our sensuous side is governed by laws of nature. Thus, what we find attractive, or which objects of inclination appeal to us and how much, is contingent and not subject to rational control. According to Kant, some reluctance to duty will always remain part of a finite agent, and even virtuous agents can always be tempted (see e.g. CPrR 5: 32.35-33.5, Rel 6: 93.4-13) – claiming otherwise means promoting enthusiasm (see CPrR 5: 84.22-86.7). Hence, for Kant, agents might be in a psychological conflict concerning whether to choose the rational option or an alternative course of action which is of great appeal to them, but, as far as reason is concerned, the case is clear. The

psychological conflict remains but it is no longer a case of conflicting reasons that need to be weighed against each other.

3. Demandingness

Kant's MR has the potential to make his ethics extraordinarily demanding. Once the voice of pure practical reason speaks up, there is nothing to be said in favour of any other option anymore. However, when Kant speaks of the priority of duty, he usually talks about *perfect* duties or absolute prohibitions in contrast to inclinations, i.e. cases in which there is a *direct conflict* between the commands of duty and inclinations. In these cases, matters are clear: we have to omit actions of certain types in all situations. There is nothing rational to be said in favour of going against a perfect duty. It is clear that perfect duties can require us to undergo great hardship and even to sacrifice our life.¹⁹ In cases of conflict between perfect duty and an agent's well-being, it would not even be rational for the agent to weigh well-being against duty. After all, there is just one option that has reason on its side.²⁰

Whilst perfect duties are the paradigm of duty for Kant, he also recognizes *imperfect duties*. These duties, famously, allow for '*latitude*' (MM 6: 390)²¹, and they are of particular relevance for the issue of demandingness, since they encompass the kind of duties that are usually the prime focus of the overdemandingness objection: duties to the globally poor and victims of emergencies, such as famine and natural catastrophes. For Kant, these duties of rescue and beneficence fall largely under the category of wide duties to others.²² If we want to understand how silencing impacts demandingness, as it is standardly discussed, we must look at the status of imperfect duties and discuss whether silencing also applies to the promotion of obligatory ends.

One prominent recent answer is provided by Jens Timmermann (2013: 46fn.33) who believes that when imperfect duties apply to a specific situation – and whether they do is of course contingent – 'they command with the force of practical necessity and silence the claims of

inclination'. According to this reading, for every situation in which we could either benefit others or perfect ourselves and in which we could do so without a violation of perfect duties, we have decisive reasons to do this (help others and/or improve ourselves). In fact, we have absolutely no reason not to do so, even if it requires extreme sacrifice of us. This interpretation implies that, within the constraint of perfect duties, we must do as much as we can to benefit others (and to perfect ourselves) unless we are in a situation in which it is *impossible* to help others or to perfect ourselves. Latitude thus only extends to the specific means to help others, since these means are contingent, and the silencing force of imperfect duties is limited only by perfect duties and the principle 'Ought Implies Can'. It is fair to assume that, unless we are very poor ourselves, we are rarely in a situation in which it is impossible for us to benefit others (by writing a cheque to Oxfam, etc.). Furthermore, even in a utopic future in which global poverty and global disasters do not exist anymore, Kant's ethics might still be very demanding, since imperfect duties do not require that we help the worst-off or those worse off than we are, but that we help others achieve their (permissible) ends *simpliciter*. Thus, even in an almost ideal world, this could potentially still require great sacrifice, for instance, if others have ends that are difficult to achieve and they need much help to do so.²³

Timmermann (2018) himself is aware that his interpretation is in need of strategies to take the sting out of overdemandingness objections, and he suggests a number of such strategies. However, given that the very demanding view is problematic, even according to its advocates, we should ask whether this view is correct. Reading Kant's conception of imperfect duties differently, as more moderately demanding, has, even apart from any textual evidence, the advantage that it helps avoid the problem that Timmermann thinks he must solve.

Whilst silencing in combination with perfect duties can result in extreme demands, we will now argue that although it is a matter of silencing as to *whether* we do comply with an

imperfect duty, the absolute rational authority of the moral law does not require that we do as much as we can. There is latitude in how and how much we comply with an imperfect duty.

When we look at passages in which Kant talks about silencing or exclusion, it is significant that the context is always a *conflict* between morality and happiness. This conflict, that notably distinguishes Kant's conception of silencing from McDowell's, is very important for understanding the demandingness of Kant's ethics. Kant demands that 'I must first be sure that I am not acting *against* my duty; only afterwards am I permitted to look around for happiness' (TP 8: 283.15-19, our emphasis). Whilst I may never violate duty, Kant does not say here that I must make sure that there is no alternative course of action that would promote obligatory ends (better or at all) before I can care about my own happiness. Silencing only kicks in when acting *against* duty would be an option or 'when it is a matter of complying with [one's] duty' (TP 8: 278.17), not when agents might merely fail to be as good as they could be. He says elsewhere that the 'iron voice' of reason only speaks up when an agent is tempted to be 'disobedient' (*Ungehorsam*) against its commands (RPT 8: 402.21-3), and that in cases of 'collision', happiness is not to be 'taken into consideration at all' (TP 8: 283.6-10).²⁴ Silencing obtains in cases of a direct conflict between duty and courses of actions incentivized by inclinations, or in cases in which I could only satisfy my inclinations by doing something that constitutes a *violation* of duty.

That Kant speaks of 'acting *against* my duty' (TP 8: 283.15-19, our emphasis), 'disobedience' to duty (RPT 8: 402.21-3) and 'complying with duty' (TP 8: 278.17) suggest that the conflict he has in mind here is one where duty commands one course of action and inclinations incentivise another one that would require that I externally act against duty. This is, however, not the only possible conflict within Kant's framework. Kant also thinks that there can be a conflict when morality and happiness require the *same* external action, e.g. when prudence incentivizes that agents comply with duty in order to avoid punishment or social ostracism.

These are also conflicts to which silencing applies, since an agent who pursues her happiness in mere conformity with the moral law does not do what morality requires of her: acting *from* respect for the moral law. After all, Kant would think that an agent who returns a deposit only to avoid punishment or to preserve her good reputation (see TP 8: 286.31-4) does not understand that what matters in this situation is duty alone. This agent's willing is determined by empirical incentives instead of respect for the moral law.²⁵

Some of the passages we already looked at clearly indicate that, in cases of conflict, not only contravening incentives are silenced but *all* impure incentives. In cases of conflict or when a violation of duty is among an agent's options, the moral law 'excludes *all* inclinations from immediate influence on the will' (CPrR 5: 80.24-5) and 'excludes [inclinations] *entirely*' from an agent's choice, and 'separates off *entirely* the influence of inclination from action' (G 4: 400.25-31, all emphasis our own; see also CPrR 5: 74.19-21). This makes sense since Kant's ethics is concerned with determination of the will. Kantian agents are not asked to deliberate between different states of affairs that they can bring about, but between different principles or maxims. An agent who, in a case of conflict between morality and inclinations, does outwardly the right thing but from a wrong maxim has not done what she had most, and in fact in this situation the only reasons, to do: acting from a maxim of respect for the moral law. On Kant's ethical theory the notion of silencing therefore entails that, in cases of conflict, impure considerations that incentivize the outwardly correct action are silenced as well. That duty, once it speaks up or issues commands or prohibitions, normatively silences *all* inclinations is one of the main senses in which Kant's form of MR is distinct from other theories that focus on state of affairs instead of on principles, motives or intentions.

Finally, to understand silencing correctly, we must bear in mind that, whilst duty can silence all inclinations, it only does so in cases of *conflict*. When Kant explains latitude in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he stresses that failure to fulfil an imperfect duty 'is not in itself

culpability (demeritum) ... but rather mere *deficiency in moral worth*', unless we fail to promote an obligatory end *as a matter of principle* (MM 6: 390.18-29). For Kant, there can be actions that lack merit given that an agent did have the opportunity to further an obligatory end, yet these meritless actions do not constitute moral violations (see also MM 6: 227.30-228.3, 384.5-8). In those cases, in which we could further an obligatory end, but not doing so would not constitute a violation of duty, silencing does not apply because these are not cases of conflict.²⁶ In these cases, agents have latitude regarding how much they want to do to further obligatory ends. Kant does not think that any small opportunity to promote an obligatory end silences personal ends.

This reading of Kant's MR is also supported by the content of the duty of beneficence. Beneficence is not the duty to donate to a specific charity, to save a specific person, etc., but something much more general, namely, to *adopt an end*. In this sense, I have satisfied the absolute priority of duty if I commit myself (for the right reasons) to absolute prohibitions and adopt all obligatory ends. Of course, adopting an end implies some commitment to *promoting* this end. Although an imperfect duty requires *that* we adopt an end, the imperfect duty does not require that we promote this end as far as possible, i.e. it does not silence other concerns insofar as they only speak against *maximally* promoting an obligatory end.²⁷ Having adopted an end cannot imply that I am required to promote this end in all situations, to an absolute maximum and to the detriment of all other ends. After all, there is a plurality of obligatory ends and there are other ends than obligatory ones that are permissible and rational to pursue (see G 4: 436.19-22, CPrR 5: 34.11-2, MM 6: 385.1-9).

It should be noted that there is still one important way in which the absolute authority of morality makes obligatory ends special compared to other ends. In cases in which we could without much effort help another person in urgent need, for instance take the famous Shallow Pond scenarios, not helping is incompatible with having adopted the obligatory end of others'

happiness, or it would constitute an action that shows complete indifference to the needs of others. This would be a violation of duty and nothing can be rationally said for it. In such cases we are clearly required to help.²⁸ Latitude, after all, only applies to how much we further the end, not to whether we adopt this end at all.

There can be proper conflicts between helping and not helping at all, since not helping at all would mean that I made it my principle not to further an obligatory end and this would be tantamount to a moral violation (see above). I avoid this conflict, if I make it my maxim to help, even if I do not help to the maximum extent that I could help. Beneficence requires us to not adopt a maxim that ‘looked with complete indifference on the need of others’ (CPrR 5: 69.20-35, see also G 4: 423.21-3). It is only a ‘maxim of self-interest [that] would conflict with itself if it were made a universal law, that is, it is contrary to duty’ (MM 6: 543.10-2). Only maxims of complete disregard for others, or of unlimited self-interest violate beneficence. It is not the case that agents must adopt maxims of furthering other people’s happiness as much as they possibly can.

Silencing concerns perfect duties and the question of whether we comply with imperfect duties at all. In the case of perfect duties, we either violate them or not, whereas when it comes to the question of how and how much we have to further the ends that we are morally compelled to adopt, it is not the case that any opportunity to promote an obligatory end silences all other concerns. The promotion of obligatory ends and many issues pertaining to the question of what and how much we have to do for the poor and needy thus builds on a framework different from silencing.

This obviously raises the question as to what this framework is and how demanding our imperfect duties towards the poor are within this framework. We cannot discuss this in detail here and will close with a test case that can provide us with some indications of how Kantians

should and should not think of beneficence, given that Kant was a moral rationalist but silencing only applies to cases of conflict. Imagine a billionaire who, whenever he has the chance to help anyone, gives or donates only 1 cent or a similarly incremental sum. It seems strange to say that he promotes an obligatory end, let alone that he does so at every occasion and that, given latitude regarding how much we have to do, he does everything that imperfect duties to others can require of him. In fact, we might worry that Kant's ethics might appear absurd if it let agents get away with such minuscule contributions.²⁹ That latitude extends to the question of how much we must help in each case, however, does not commit Kant to the view that anything we do is good enough. This is so for three reasons.

Firstly, for certain actions it is foreseeable that they will make no difference. In the case of the billionaire it is foreseeable for the billionaire that a donation of 1 cent will not enable a charity to save one more person.³⁰ Actions that foreseeably do not make a difference do not count as promoting an end. After all, once the agent has adopted an end it is not up to her to decide, which courses of action are means to promote this end. This is rather a matter of what this end consists in and the circumstances. The promotion of ends is governed by the hypothetical imperative of skill that 'whoever wills the end also wills (in conformity with reason necessarily) the only means to it that are in his control' (G 4: 417.30-418.1). This means that the application of ends is still governed by a (empirical practical) rational principle and not completely up to the agent. Certain means are just not adequate to promote an end an agent wills. An agent who could have employed effective means, but only employs means that foreseeably make no perceptible difference to promoting the end, thus fails to promote an end that she could have promoted. If that end is morally obligatory, it seems plausible to say that she violates her duty, at least once she has made a principle of her ineffective help. Imperfect duties to others require not merely that, given the occasion, we do *something* (no matter how irrelevant to the task at hand), but that we do something that constitute a reasonable

contribution to furthering an end. This is a matter of what it means to have actually made an end one's own, as opposed to merely professing commitment to this end.

Secondly, our proposal that beneficence calls at least for acts that constitute *reasonable* contributions, of course, raises the question of what the standard of reasonableness is here.³¹ We take it that this greatly depends on an agent's means, resources and history of helping others. Wherever the exact threshold for reasonable help lies, the billionaire who in every single case only donates 1 cent strikes us intuitively as inadequate. It is legitimate to appeal to our intuitions here and to read Kant's ethics as intended to be largely in line with our intuitive or pre-theoretical notion of morality, since it is Kant's expressed aim to clarify, systematize and vindicate 'common moral rational cognition' (G 4: 393.3).³² It is therefore plausible to assume that the standard of reasonableness that is at play here is not a technical one, but rather one that is already present in how non-philosophers think about what counts as beneficent help and what does not.

Thirdly, what if the billionaire only donates 1 cent, but *from duty* and from no other motive? Should that not qualify as a morally worthy action and as meritorious? Presumably, Kant would say that *if* the billionaire genuinely believed that she helps someone and does it from duty then, yes. But Kant would also caution us. After all, he was a keen observer of human frailty and in particular of the phenomenon of self-deception, which he discusses under the label of 'rationalizing' (*Vernünfteln*) in many passages.³³ A wealthy person who claims to be committed to beneficence, but who only ever donates tiny increments or performs actions that make no perceptible difference rather appears to be someone who is self-deceived about his ends and actions and who wants to maintain the illusion that he is beneficent whilst keeping the majority of his resources to himself. Whilst Kant appreciates good intentions above all else, he is not committed to the view that anyone who professes to have good intentions and to act on them performs actions of moral worth. Kant knows human nature too well for this.

Conclusion

Kant holds a particularly strong version of MR. He believes that perfect duty can silence the normative standing of non-moral concerns. Imperfect duties are more complicated within this framework, though, since they allow for latitude. Imperfect duties can silence inclinations in cases of conflicts. We have to adopt certain ends, no matter what we are inclined to do, and we may not make it our principle to act against or be indifferent to these ends. However, this does not mean that agents must do all they can in order to further these ends. Our interpretation shares Timmermann's view that Kant advocates silencing, but in the important case of duties of beneficence and other imperfect duties, this does not rule out that we take our own happiness into consideration even if we could further an obligatory end. Our interpretation has the advantage that it can account for Kant's strong claims about the absolute priority duty enjoys, but it also shows that Kant is not as demanding as Timmermann thinks he is.

Notes

¹ *Groundwork* translations follow Kant (2011), other Kant translations are, with occasional modifications, from Kant (1996). The following abbreviations are used: CPR: *Critique of Pure Reason*, G: *Groundwork*, CPrR: *Critique of Practical Reason*, Rel: *Religion*, MM: *Metaphysics of Morals*, Anth: *Anthropology*, TP: *On the Common Saying*, RPT: *On a Recently Prominent Tone of Superiority in Philosophy*, Ped: *Pedagogy*, Refl: *Reflections*, L-Eth Vigil: *Lecture notes Vigilantius*, L-Eth Mr2: *Lecture notes Mrongovius 2*.

² See van Ackeren and Sticker (2015) for such an attempt. On attempts to define the threshold between demandingness and overdemandingness, see Hooker (2009).

³ Sobel (2007) argues for the former view, Woolard (2016) defends the latter, agent-centered, view.

⁴ Classical examples with regard to Kant are certain coordination maxims. It should be noted that this caveat does not mean that we think that false-negative objections against the CI can be sustained.

⁵ Note that the opposition of moral and non-moral reasons is not strictly necessary for MR to be true (see Portmore 2011: 39fn.32). Theories, such as ancient eudaemonism, that claim that morality and well-being can never conflict can still endorse MR.

⁶ See Griffin (1986: ch.5) for further critical discussion of non-commensurability. It should be noted that many only consider what we call *strong* MR as MR (see Archer 2014, Dorsey 2016), and consider the view that morality merely generates rational permissions a form of moral anti-rationalism (see Dorsey 2016: ch.1).

⁷ This is overridingness in its strongest form. For various distinctions, see Archer (2014: §1).

⁸ For our present purpose, we will not distinguish Raz's (1999) idea of exclusionary reasons from silencing. Crisp in his commentary thankfully stresses that there is an important difference between a normative and deliberative view of silencing. Admittedly, our interpretation blurs this distinction. However, it is difficult to attribute only one of the two views to Kant. This needs a more detailed discussion.

⁹ See Harty (2007 and 2012) for critical discussion of contemporary forms of silencing.

¹⁰ Timmermann seems to be the first to make extensive use of the term 'silencing' in Kant scholarship (Timmermann 2005: sec.1, 2007a: 19, 2007b: sec.2), but he does not discuss the term in the context of current forms of MR and other current forms of silencing, as we do in this section, nor in the context of the demandingness debate. In addition, he (2007b: 169) thinks that silencing is a form of lexical priority. However, it is rather an *alternative* to this, as lexical priority is best understood as a form of overriding, not of silencing.

¹¹ See also Kant's somewhat more obscure claim, that personal advantage can be 'separated and washed from every particle of reason' (CPrR 5: 93.5-6).

¹² Gregor (Kant 1996: 209) translates: 'before which all inclinations are numb'. This does not preserve the idea that inclinations are *made* silent/numb by the moral law, as indicated by the German *verstummen*.

¹³ Korsgaard (1996: 119), for instance, believes that 'the good will is the source of all the good in the world'.

¹⁴ G 4: 396.24-37, CPrR 5: 61.24-9, 93.11-15, Rel 6: 46.31-40, L-Eth Mr2: 600.1-2.

¹⁵ In RPT 8: 402, it does indeed look as if Kant has a psychological conception in mind, according to which the silenced consideration does not even appear as relevant to an agent. The majority of passages, however, shows that normatively silenced considerations of self-interest still affect agents psychologically. It is only an ideally rational agent who would not be affected by these considerations anymore.

¹⁶ Raz doubts the distinction between moral and non-moral reasons as two context-independent sub-classes of practical reason (see Raz 1999).

¹⁷ For more on the conditioning relation between morality and happiness see CPR A808-15/B836-43, CPrR 5: 130.11-28, MM 6: 481.16-21, Anth 7: 326.11-14, Refl 15: 456.20-26, Refl 19: 284.28-285.2, 288.12-14.

¹⁸ If MR presupposes that the priority of morality holds true for the entire class of moral reasons, as, for instance, Archer (2014: Introduction) assumes, then McDowell's view cannot be classified as MR, because he believes that some moral reasons can be outweighed by non-moral reasons.

¹⁹ See the second gallows case in CPrR 5: 30 as an example. See van Ackeren and Sticker (2015) for more.

²⁰ Kantians of course have, in response to the infamous murderer-at-the-door case, proposed a number of promising ways to make Kant's MR and the context-insensitivity of the Categorical Imperative more palatable. See, *pars pro toto*, Korsgaard (1996: ch.5).

²¹ There is a vast amount of literature on latitude. We cannot do this literature justice here. One of the most influential approaches is Hill's latitudinarianism (1992: ch.8). According to this reading, obligatory ends only require that we do *something* to further them, but we are free to decide when we do it and how much we do. We, by contrast, will argue that only the 'how much' is up to us – but this makes Kant already less demanding than on Timmermann's reading (see below).

²² Of course, this might not always be so. I might have promised to save a person and I might owe certain people help because I participated in or have benefited from injustices committed against them (MM 6: 453.1-33, 454.22-8). We shall remain agnostic about these cases and focus on cases that are best understood as falling under beneficence.

²³ Another very demanding conception of imperfect duties to others is Cummiskey's (1990: sec.7) 'Spartan' interpretation of Kantian beneficence as demanding the same level of sacrifice as certain consequentialist normative theories that command to maximize an impersonal good. This is meant to show that Kantians should endorse consequentialist normative principles. Timmermann does not believe that Kant's ethics is consequentialist in any sense, but it is interesting that those who stress the affinities between Kantianism and consequentialism likewise advocate a very demanding reading of beneficence.

²⁴ See also: 'in comparison and contrast' with morality, 'life with all its agreeableness has no worth at all' (CPrR 5: 88.16-9), i.e. once there is a contrast or at least a comparison, the goodness of an agent's life is affected.

²⁵ We are grateful to an anonymous referee for encouraging us to say more about the two different kinds of conflicts and Kant's MR.

²⁶ See also: 'But this *distinction* of the principle of happiness from that of morality is not, for this reason, at once an *opposition*, between them, and pure practical reason does not require that one should *renounce* claims to happiness but only that as soon as duty is in question, one should *take no account* of them' (CPrR 5: 93.11-5). Happiness and morality can come apart without opposition or conflict.

²⁷ This is already in a nutshell in the *Groundwork*: 'To be beneficent where one can is one's duty' (G 4: 398.8), i.e. we have to be beneficent whenever there is an occasion for it, but Kant does not say that we also have to do as much as we possibly can in these cases. In the lecture notes *Vigilantius*, it is stated explicitly that 'the duty of well-doing determines only that I should support the other out of my means, but how much remains absolutely reserved to the measures of my needs, my resources, and the other's distress' (L-Eth Vigil 27: 536.21-537.8).

²⁸ See also Pinheiro Walla (2015: 734): 'latitude shrinks away when refusing to help would amount to *giving up* one's commitment to beneficence *altogether*'.

²⁹ Stohr (2011: 46) for instance points out that utilitarians could criticize Kant for being underdemanding or that 'Kantianism is not adequately demanding when it comes to beneficence', because latitude might leave too much leeway.

³⁰ We take it that the same is the case for direct donations to poor people. It is unlikely that a beggar will be able to afford one more item of food, etc. due to such an incremental donation; and such a donation would in fact rather be seen as an insult, thus violating Kant's *dictum* that we must take care not to humiliate those we intend to help (MM 6: 448.22-449.2, 453.17-33). It is of course *possible* that the 1 cent makes a positive difference and that this is foreseeable, for instance, because I know that only 1 cent is missing to reach a threshold for another

blanket or emergency meal that a charity will purchase and send to the worst off. But even in this case the 1 cent is most likely parasitic on other individuals donating substantially more, given that 1 cent is only incremental with respect to the cost of a blanket or meal.

³¹ We thank an anonymous referee for pressing us on this point.

³² This is not only his aim in the *Groundwork*. In the Second Critique, Kant stresses that he does not aim to “introduce a new principle of all morality and, as it were, first invent it” (CPrR 5: 8.fn). See Grenberg (2013) and Sticker (2017a) for discussion of Kant’s systematization and vindication of the ordinary conception of morality.

³³ See G 4: 404.37-405.19, as well as Sticker (2017b, sec. 1.2) for more references.

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